

# GOLDEN LESSONS

The rower **Alex Gregory** won a gold medal at the 2012 London Olympics. But one day of glory is only part of his story. He reveals what it takes to succeed

**I** am an Olympic gold medallist and three times World Champion. That is my story's headline, but it is not the complete story. It tells you the end result, but not how I got there, what I discovered about myself along the way - and how I learnt what it takes to succeed in any discipline.

Early in 2008, as the Beijing Olympics loomed, I had endured an injury-plagued year and a string of failures. I was debating whether to continue on what felt increasingly like a thankless journey. I was training full time, injured and desperately trying to scrape enough money together to pay the rent by gardening in the evenings. It was while I was weeding in the dark and rain, after six hours of severe physical training with a stress fracture in my rib, that I reached my all time low. I realised then that I wasn't going to make my dream a reality. I wasn't going to be able to challenge for a medal in Beijing. Indeed, given my injuries and results, I wasn't even likely to make the team.

This was the seventh year of disappointment, so I was getting used to it. Just over a year into first learning to row I found myself at the Great Britain >

PHOTOGRAPHS ALEX BEER, GETTY, OLIVIA HARRIS



Junior final trials. Selection for a place at the Junior World Championships was on the cards. Midway through the final race, sitting in a good position, everything started to go dark. I lost control of my breathing, became dizzy and my limbs stopped functioning. I suddenly felt as though I was rowing through treacle. A second later I was upside down in the water. I had capsized in the middle of the race. Devastating.

Being taken out of selection was a huge disappointment but it showed me how close I had come after very little time in the sport. A spark had formed and I wanted to see how far I could get in my new pursuit.

### **Rowing in treacle**

The following year, I was selected for the Under-23 World Championships in Poland. This was to be my first Great Britain vest, something I was very proud of. We ended up limping home in last place. It was an eye-opening experience and a shocking insight into the international standard. I was going to have to get much faster.

The following year, I joined forces with Colin Smith, an extremely experienced rower. He had already won medals at Under-23 World Championship level. We were a good partnership and showed promising speed. It was in Amsterdam at the World Championships, neck and neck with an Italian crew in the final, fighting it out for a gold, that history repeated itself. The darkness closed in, I lost control of my limbs and my breathing pattern went totally out of sync. I was back in the treacle, going nowhere fast. I don't remember the last quarter of the race, but from hospital I was told we had come fourth. Again, this was a devastating blow after such high expectations. There was obviously something wrong with me, mentally or physically.

Despite this setback I found myself back on the river and training again. This was to be my final year in the Under-23 age group so I thought I would give it one more try. I was diagnosed with exercise-induced asthma, which explained some of the problems I had been having. Now armed with an inhaler I was a little more confident that such a debilitating event wouldn't happen again during a race.

### **Scull and cross**

Rowing was everything to me. I was studying at university but sacrificing a 'normal' life to train. I proved myself again and was selected in the single scull to race at the World Championships in Belgium. Weeks before the event I started to get nervous. The single scull can be a lonely



#### **Pulling together**

The team in action prior to the quadruple sculls repechage during the 2005 Rowing World Cup at Dorney Lake

place and, with no one around to share the pressure, I felt very isolated. As the event progressed I realised that my nerves were getting on top of me. I scraped into the semi-final but failed to make the top six. Athletes who I had beaten all year in less important races had beaten me. Another devastating blow.

I returned home feeling I had let down all the people who had supported me - my team, coach, friends and family. Clearly, rowing wasn't for me. I was fine physically, my asthma was under control, but mentally I obviously wasn't capable of doing this. There was surely no cure for nerves or coping with pressure. I left university without a job lined up. Rowing had consumed me. I hadn't thought ahead. Then I was thrown a lifeline: the chance to train as a full-time athlete with the senior GB Olympic rowers. A small amount of funding just covered my rent.

After another year of training, in 2007,

I found myself at my first senior World Championships in Munich. This was the important year before the Olympics. With three experienced team-mates in the boat I was able to control my nerves and felt under control going into the racing. But, we didn't race to the best of our ability and failed to get the result we needed. Yet again I travelled home with a heavy heart, wondering whether to continue pursuing this seemingly impossible goal.

### **Olympic dreams**

And this brought me to Olympic year. It was definitely going to be my last attempt. If I made the Olympic team that would be a bonus and I would leave rowing satisfied that I had given it a go. I trained well, performed in trials and was selected to race in a crew at the last qualification regatta a month before the games.

Things were looking promising, we had some good speed, morale was high,

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**GOLDEN LESSONS  
DON'T OVERLOOK  
WEAKNESSES**

**“Concentrating on honing your strengths and not identifying or tackling your weaknesses is commonplace”**

then disaster struck: a badly drawn stroke caused me to damage my rib. After a few days of searing chest pain I had to admit defeat. Extensive scans showed I had a rib stress fracture. I would not be racing in a week's time, a substitute would take my place and I would definitely not be going to the Olympics.

That was that. It was over. I was filled with guilt, sadness and immense frustration at how all those years of sacrifice had turned out. The crew did not qualify and so, because of me, there was no GB quad scull at Beijing.

**The moment**

I was injured, poor and despondent. What to do? The only thing I knew to do was to carry on, and find out what was on the other side of this deep, deep low in the roller coaster of my pursuit of excellence.

Then, for the second time in my rowing career I was given two huge opportunities. The first came from a school friend who introduced me to the sport - something I will forever be grateful for. The second came, incredibly, when chief coach Jürgen Gröbler asked me to be the spare man for the Olympic team once my rib had healed.

It seemed more than strange. I had done nothing but let the team down over all those years. Having learnt earlier in my career that opportunities should not be missed, I travelled to China with the team. At least I would experience the atmosphere of an Olympic Games - albeit from the sidelines.

Beijing was where the turnaround happened. It was a magical time and without doubt the most influential period in my rowing career. I was a spectator watching the people I had trained with seven days a week, 344 days a year for seven years, perform spectacularly. I was full of contrasting emotions: pride to have been part of this team, jealous that they were doing what I so badly wanted to do, and surprisingly motivated to give it all one last try.

The moment of realisation was sudden



**Water victory**  
Men's Four gold medalists at the 2009 FISA Rowing World Cup in Banyoles, Spain

and powerful. All these years, after each disappointment the answer had always been to get back on the river, refine my skills and glide ever closer to the Holy Grail of perfect technique. But sitting there in the stands with the national anthem playing I realised I had only ever worked on my strengths and overlooked my weaknesses. I was confident that I could have sat in any of those gold medal-winning boats from any nation and not upset the balance. But, watching these athletes closely I realised the problem lay elsewhere: I simply wasn't strong enough.

**Beyond strengths**

The more I talk to people in the athletics world and beyond, the more I realise that concentrating on honing your strengths and not identifying or tackling your weaknesses is commonplace. This applies to the tennis player who habitually avoids using their weak backhand; the CEO who is great with numbers, but doesn't understand how marketing works; the teacher who knows their subject inside-out but is not so good at classroom discipline.

The problem is it is so easy to work on what you are already good at. There is instant satisfaction and positive feedback with an often false belief that large steps have been made in the right direction. In fact, the likelihood is that the rate of improvement is small and relatively insignificant. You do something well and strive every sinew to do it ever so slightly better. The belief is that accentuating your strengths offsets your weaknesses.

We are encouraged as parents and teachers that giving positive feedback is the right thing to do. This is something I completely agree with, but it means that

from a very early age we are all looking for this positive stimulus from others around us. We achieve this by doing and repeating actions we are good at, doing them well, making them better. The trouble is that this simply moves us even further away from what we really need to be doing to make significant changes.

I stepped off the plane from Beijing and spent the next three months locked in the gym. I set myself a target of putting on 8kg of muscle. I would need to eat more to fuel my body better, something else I wasn't good at doing. So, I doubled my calorie and protein intake, set myself an intense weights programme and within one month was seeing significant strength improvements. It took me three months to reach my target.

Added to the technique I had carefully honed, I now had strength. Back among other athletes I instantly saw the benefits. I beat those who had always beaten me before and soon after I was selected in the coxless four - GB Rowing's flagship boat. In 2009 I became World Champion, my first ever international medal. This was a far cry from 12 months previously where I sat dejectedly on the sidelines.

Now that I was a more complete athlete my confidence was at an all time >

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**GOLDEN LESSONS  
TEAMWORK**

**“Rowing is teamwork in its purest form”**

high. Results cemented that confidence and gave me proof that what I was doing was right. I suddenly saw all the years of despair in a new light: they could be turned into valuable lessons to remember in the inevitable tough times to come.

The past was necessary to get me to that point, not just a cycle of uncertainty and underperformance. So when the team had a disappointing result at the 2010 World Championships, I was far more equipped to deal with the frustration at not performing to the expected standard. While some in the crew were lost in depression I knew what was required to get back on the path, to work on the necessary parts to ensure that what happened would never happen again and not even consider giving up. The years of failure had toughened me, prepared me and given me the tools I would need to move on from mistakes and continue to pursue a dream. A year later I was World Champion for the second time.

**Teamwork**

At a personal level, working on my weaknesses radically changed my

performance. Years of disappointment also toughened me. There are so many tasks in every walk of life that could be achieved faster, simpler and with less expense if some basic principles were met.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the performance of teams. A lot of talk about teamwork often complicates rather than clarifies. If you row, you understand the real nature of teamwork. Rowing relies totally on every crew member moving exactly in sync. Any tiny difference between two individuals can affect the run of the boat. To a spectator on the bank it can look as though everyone is in perfect harmony but there can still be an imperceptible discrepancy that only those in the boat can feel. It may not even be possible to describe it: it is simply a feeling. This gives us a powerful insight into the nature of teamwork.

Early in 2012, we were looking ahead to the London Olympics. We came together as a crew in April and struggled to find any natural flow and harmony between the four of us in the boat. There was nothing glaringly obvious that any of us was doing wrong but we just

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**GOLDEN LESSONS  
TAKE ADVICE FROM  
THE BEST**

**“I was fascinated to discover that four-time gold medal winner Matthew Pinsent and his crews had problems of their own”**

couldn't find that indescribable link. We battled on, desperately trying to find the answer to how we were going to click.

We raced at the pre-Olympic regattas winning two of them and getting a world best time at another, but still knew there was something missing. It wasn't until we were beaten by a slick, well-drilled Australian crew that we knew for certain we couldn't just get by with how we were rowing.

**Wise words**

Seven weeks before the Olympic Games, something had to change. It did. Wise words from four-time gold medal winner Matthew Pinsent set the conversations flowing. The evening before flying out to train in Austria, my team-mate Tom James and I met Matthew to pick his brains for a couple of hours. Listening to his Olympic experiences was quite extraordinary on the eve of my first Olympics as a real participant.

I was fascinated to discover that he and his crews had problems of their own. I had been under the impression that everything had run smoothly leading up to his Olympic glory. Matthew assured us that this had simply not been the case. There had been major illnesses, injuries, crew changes and race losses.

He told us that immediately before his fourth gold medal win in Athens in 2004 his crew had been in a similar situation to ours. They had been beaten in the final event before the Olympics and like us, something needed to change. Matthew explained the process they went through to ensure every aspect that could possibly make a difference to their crew was looked at and what they did to turn their performance around.

Tom and I left with some great ideas and felt confident that all was not lost. This could be turned around, we could



First among equals  
Saluting the crowds after  
winning the Men's Four  
final at London 2012

get the result we wanted but it would take a change in our approach and for all five of us – the team and coach Jürgen – to work closer together than ever before.

**Peak performance**

We arrived at our lake in the Austrian mountains, full of nerves about the challenge that lay ahead. The four of us sat down for a meeting at once. Tom and I laid out the information we had been given and our ideas on how we could move the project forwards. Immediately there was a positive vibe among us all and a wave of excitement hit. Doors were opening for us and our only limitations to what we could achieve together would come from ourselves.

A plan was suddenly forming. There was a willingness to take on ideas and embrace challenges. We entered a new realm of honesty, communication and teamwork. We discussed everything the season had brought so far. Each of us laid out our feelings of how the others were rowing, what we needed to change and how we thought we could do it. Most of our opinions were very similar. We just had never voiced them so openly before. We trained for the next seven weeks, with no time limit on discussions and no external distractions. There was only one satisfactory outcome here, Olympic gold.

**Finding a voice**

We set out a target. Before every training session we discussed what we would do on every stroke for every kilometre. We would stick to one thing we wanted to change and not relent until that change was embedded in our subconscious. We were under a lot of pressure, but we shared our worries, stresses and strains. We were totally open with each other. We could say what we needed to say as long it was constructive and aimed at taking us closer to our goal. Everything we did was efficient and to the point.

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**GOLDEN LESSONS  
SET TARGETS**

**“Before every training session we would discuss what we would do on every stroke for every kilometre”**



Keeping things simple is a guideline I try to live by in rowing. The problems arise when people try to overcomplicate a simple task. A job is given, each person has an opinion, there is indecision, everyone carries out the task in their own way and, if the target is ever met, it will have been a slow and painful process. But, with communication, everyone works together and the job is done efficiently. This level of focus was mentally exhausting, but it was an experience that the four of us will share for the rest of our lives.

**Out of body**

Six weeks after that first team discussion we raced in the heat of the Olympics and won. It was a better race than earlier in the season but still needed work. Three days later we raced the semi-final against the Australians who had beaten us. We won. We were better again but still needed work. After seven weeks of bringing our physical and mental beings as close together as we possibly could, we raced in the Olympic final.

The start line was eerily quiet. Every hour I had ever spent training was for the next six minutes. It was so serious that it almost felt amusing. As the starter called Great Britain, a wave of noise rolled up the lake from 2km away. Thirty thousand people were supporting us.

Everything happened in slow motion after that. We came forward, the buzzer went and, as the sound rang in my ears, I remember saying to myself, ‘Oh god, here we go!’ I felt as if I was watching myself doing the race – it was a bizarre out-of-body experience. With the best first ten strokes we had done together as a crew, our race was set. It gave us a platform from which to push out on to a strong consistent rhythm. We pushed our bow ball into the lead from around 150m and managed to maintain that position.

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**GOLDEN LESSONS  
KEEP IT SIMPLE**

**“Too many problems arise when people try to overcomplicate a simple task”**

We were putting together everything we had been talking, thinking and dreaming about since our project began. We extended our lead throughout the first 1,500m and, with only 500 to go, with the crowd supporting us in a deafening roar, there was no way any crew in the world could get past us. We crossed the line first. This was our perfect race.

The relief was immense. I had no other emotion. As the medal was hung around my neck and the national anthem played, I looked up at my parents, brother, son and partner in the stands, tears streaming down their faces. They had lived this long journey with me. We had finally done it together. ■

Alex Gregory is training for the 2016 Olympics. Follow him on Twitter @alexgregorygb or visit alexgregorygb.com